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***Freedom Before Being: Berdyaev, Dostoevsky,
and the Ontology of the Ungrund.
Reconsidering Divine Antinomy and
Uncreated Freedom in Russian Religious Thought***

At the very centre of his book on Dostoevsky, Nikolai Berdyaev makes the following remark:

If he [Dostoevsky] had developed his teaching about God and the Absolute *to its necessary conclusion* he would have to acknowledge *an antinomy in the nature even of God*, to have found in him also a chasm of darkness, thus approximating to Jacob Boehme's theory of the *Ungrund*. The human heart is in essence antinomian, but it dwells in a fathomless abyss of being.¹

Why is the theory of the *Ungrund* or the *bottomless* so important for Berdyaev? Why does he set it as the crucial criterion of Dostoevsky's philosophical consistency? I would like to argue from the very outset that this is because Berdyaev believed that without the *Ungrund* freedom, divine or human, is impossible. In other words, freedom is impossible if God is imagined as the Aristotelian Absolute or *actus purus* [coincidence of opposites], i.e., an *esse* [essential nature or essence] without *posse* [possibility, potency], a full actualisation without potency. Freedom is conceivable only if we posit an antinomy in God, if we de-

1 Nicolas BERDYAEV, *Dostoevsky: An Interpretation*, transl. by Donald Attwater (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), p. 59 (emphasis mine – R. K.). Further in the text, the page numbers will figure in the main body of the essay. In the 2009 edition from which I am quoting both in the title and in the text the translator uses the “Dostoevsky” form of the surname. This is reshaped in the paper in the form of “Dostoevsky”. For a critical approach to Berdyaev's reading of Dostoevsky see, for ex.: Vladimir K. KANTOR, “Berdyaev on Dostoevsky: Theodicy and Freedom”, *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, 53 (4), 2015, pp. 324-337, doi:10.1080/10611967.2015.1123060; Татьяна Г. МАГАРИЛ-ИЛЬЯЕВА, “Богословие Ф. М. Достоевского в понимании Бердяева”, *Достоевский и мировая культура. Филологический журнал*, 2020, № 3 (11), с. 117-139, doi:10.22455/2619-0311-2020-3-117-139; David PATTERSON, “Dostoevsky's Poetics of Spirit: Bakhtin and Berdyaev”, *Dostoevsky Studies*, vol. 8, 1987, pp. 187-197.

pict God as a special kind of *possest*,² to use Nicolas of Cusa's term, a unity of *esse* and *posse* in which the latter is completely autonomous.³ From what has been said we can probably guess that, when he talks about freedom, Berdyaev does not have in mind freedom of will. For Berdyaev, freedom is the question of ontology.

To properly address this complex issue, we need to outline the context in which Dostoevsky develops his worldview.

Dostoevsky's worldview

Dostoevsky was not only a great artist, but also an ingenious dialectician and Russia's greatest metaphysician (p. 11). This is how Dostoevsky was described by Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948). Tolstoy was probably a finer artist than Dostoevsky, argues Berdyaev. Nevertheless, Dostoevsky is the greater thinker of the two, because he was aware of the "eternal human contradiction" (p. 23). By the "eternal human contradiction" Berdyaev implies a Heraclitan war between antinomic principles of light and darkness, of good and evil.

Berdyaev suggests – and this is crucial for his theory – that this antinomy in Dostoevsky does not only concern human nature, but also the essence of God. The contradiction is "eternal", which means that for Dostoevsky evil is not just a moment in the evolution of good (p. 94). "Evil is evil: its nature is interior and metaphysical, not exterior or social", stresses Berdyaev (p. 92).

Dostoevsky's dialectic holds a prominent place in his outstanding psychology (p. 11). Moreover, this dialectic makes the very quintessence of his art. For Dostoevsky, ideas are living beings and their existence is highly dynamic. He is close to Heraclitus because everything in his world is in motion, opposition, and struggle.

The world of ideas conceived by Dostoevsky is entirely original and has nothing in common with that of Plato. Ideas are not prototypes of being, primary entities, much less norms; they are the destiny of living being... Dostoevsky no less than Plato recognized that ideas as such have a value of their own. And, in spite of the present tendency to deny this autonomous value and to be blind to their worth in any writer, Dostoevsky cannot be understood – indeed, his books

2 "Possest" or "to be able to be" is Nicolas Cusa's key term that unites *esse* and *posse*, *actuality* and *potency*.

3 Nicholas of CUSA, *Triialogus de Possest*, in Jasper HOPKINS, *A concise introduction to the philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa: introduction, text, and English translation of Triialogus de Possest (1460)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1973), p. 69.

had better be left alone – unless the reader is prepared to be immersed in a vast strange universe of ideas (p. 12).

What is a writer's worldview, asks Berdyaev, if not his intuitive probing of its ontological essence? Dostoevsky's thinking is as remote as possible from an abstract system, it is more of an intuition of a genius about universal destiny. His intuition is not only artistic but also intellectual and philosophical – a true gnosis. Berdyaev believes that Dostoevsky, in a special sense, was a gnostic (p. 13). His understanding of the world is in the highest degree dynamic and when we accept it is as such, what seemed to be internal contradiction will prove to be the principle of *Coincidentia Oppositorum* (*ibid.*).

For Berdyaev, the “eternal human contradiction” is a cleavage in the spirit, and this *dédoublement* is the most important theme of Dostoevsky's novels. Dostoevsky is not a realist in the common sense of this word. His art was altogether occupied with realities of the spirit. True, his plots resemble realistic novels, describing a tale of crime, but one feels a presence of different, inner reality. Dostoevsky believes that the fundamental realities are related to the human spirit – “reality is the relations of man with God and Satan” (pp. 25-26). The relationship between Ivan Karamazov and Smerdyakov, which is the most obvious example of *dédoublement*, cannot be described as realistic. Beneath the consciousness there is always a world of the unconscious. Human beings create their relationships not only by conscious means, but more by invisible and unconscious capacities. Berdyaev here has in mind the invisible bonds between Myshkin and Nastasya Filippovna and to Rogozhin, between Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov, as well as Ivan Karamazov, and Smerdyakov, Stavrogin, Khromonozhka, and Shatov.

They are bound together by links that are not of this world's forging; there is nothing contingent in their relationship, no place for the accidents of an empirical realism; it seems as though the meeting of these beings were ordained from all eternity by a higher will [...]. In them is truly expressed the great “idea” of the universe which answers the riddle of man and the road he threads (pp. 26-27).

In the human person Berdyaev detects the same binary structure as in God. Just like God is the unity of *esse* and *posse*, so the human being is a dynamic union of consciousness and the unconscious. There is a parallel between the autonomy of the unconscious vis-à-vis consciousness and the liberty of uncreated freedom in God.

The Aristotelian Absolute is akin to a monolith being whose consciousness has completely exhausted his unconsciousness. God with binary structure, on

the other hand, is capable of creating absolute surplus in being, absolute newness feeding upon the endless potentiality of the *Ungrund*.

The Russians have never had a “Renaissance”, claims Berdyaev. An unhappy faith has withheld from them this “good fortune” of other peoples.

Russia has remained on the side-lines of the great humanistic movement of modern history. Within it has occurred the Renaissance, the spirit of the Renaissance is foreign to Russian people. Russia, to a significant degree, has remained the East and remains the East even in our day. Within it has always been insufficiently revealed the *personal principle*. In it has not been the splendid blossoming forth of the creative human individuality.⁴

What the Russians experienced from the spirit of the Renaissance were only the late fruits of European humanism in the period of its self-destruction, when it was openly fighting against the human image. Berdyaev believes that no other people has gone to such extremes and the destruction of the human visage, as well as human rights and human freedom.

No other people has displayed such hostility towards creative exuberance, such malicious jealousy towards every flourishing of human individuality. In this is something terrible for us, as Russians. We are living through in a very extreme a form the end of the Renaissance, not having experienced the Renaissance itself, not having the great remembrance of past creative profusion. The whole entirety of Russian great literature has not been Renaissance-like in its spirit; in it is not sensed a profuseness of powers, but rather the strain of sick a spirit, a tortuous search for salvation from ruin. In Pushkin alone has been something Renaissance-like, but his spirit has not prevailed within Russian literature.⁵

Berdyaev's verdict about the destiny of the Russian people is everything but easy to digest. He argues, “to us has not been given to experience the joyousness of a free humanity. In this is a peculiarity of the bitter Russian faith”.⁶ At the very summit of the Russian literature, in the works of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, there is hardly anything similar to the spirit of the Renaissance. Both writers are undergoing religious anguish, they reveal all the characteristics of Russian litera-

4 Николай А. БЕРДЯЕВ, “Конец ренессанса (к современному кризису культуры)”, in Николай А. БЕРДЯЕВ (под ред.), *София: проблемы духовной культуры и религиозной философии* (Берлин: Обелиск, 1923) с. 38.

5 *Ibid.*, с. 38-39.

6 *Ibid.*, с. 39.

ture. They seek salvation and are ready to suffer for the entire world (p. 30).

Dostoevsky's lifetime, therefore, coincides with the period of the self-dissolution of the late European Humanism. And yet, Berdyaev believes that due to his pronounced anthropocentric position, Dostoevsky was a Renaissance man.⁷ There was a ray of light in Dostoevsky's novels, coming from the world of the Renaissance. His portrayal of the human being was not only tragic; he also renewed the faith in humanity and its spiritual depth, which Humanism did not have. Dostoevsky understood that Humanism destroys man, but it cannot destroy the divine likeness in him if he turns to God (*ibid.*).

But, Dostoevsky was aware of the complexity of the Renaissance. For him, this movement was not simply an unmotivated rejection of God. He believed that the Renaissance quest entailed establishing a genuine dignity of the human person. The same search occupied the very centre of his work. Initially, Renaissance humanity was under impression that for the first time in history both man and a purely human activity were discovered, having been subjugated in the medieval era.⁸ The beginning of the humanistic era had little in common with its end. Originally, the upsurges of human powers marked a prodigious and unparalleled flourishing of human creativity. It was then that the free creativity of man and his free artistry began:⁹ "Never yet, it would seem, had man attempted such a creative ascent, as during the Renaissance era. Back then had begun the free creativity of man, his free artistry. *But he was still nigh close to the spiritual wellsprings of life*, he had not yet withdrawn so remotely from them onto the surface level of life".¹⁰

Dostoevsky's position is delicate as he enters the literary scene at the peak of the bitter war between God-man and man-god, with Nietzsche's inauguration of the supermen in 1883 on the horizon, only two years after the writer's death. Dostoevsky believed that Christ God-man represented the ideal balance between God and man. However, from the purely ontological point of view, what is it that the ideal balance between God and man requires? If we look at his concept of liberty from the perspective of Berdyaev's ontological freedom, can we say that he succeeded in endowing human beings with genuine liberty?

In one of his most important statements, Berdyaev writes that Dostoevsky was not a monophysite. In Dostoevsky's work the human person preserves its integrity, remaining eternally "unconfused" and "unchangeable". Berdyaev argues, "for Nietzsche, there was neither God nor man but only this unknown

⁷ *Ibid.*, c. 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, c. 26-27 (emphasis mine – R. K.).

man-god. For Dostoevsky, there was both God and man, and the man who is not dissolved in God but remains himself throughout all eternity" (pp. 64-65).

Preserving human personality for Dostoevsky was all the more difficult because his work, to a high degree, is dionysiac. Dionysism, as we know, gives birth to tragedy, showing human nature only in the state of exaltation (p. 22), in which human personality tends to identify itself with the impersonal ocean of being.

It is surprising that the dionysiac ecstasy did not involve him in a destructive negation of the human form and individuality, for the pagan Dionysism of Greece went to the excess of swallowing up the individual in the great impersonal stream of nature; Dionysian delirium is in general disastrous to personality. But no excitement or ecstasy could shake Dostoevsky into a denial of man, and that was the trait that made his anthropology a quite new and special phenomenon (pp. 64-65).

Dostoevsky was exclusively dionysiac, yet the human person was affirmed with all the more power. With all his antinomies and ecstatic nature, human person remained indestructible. Dostoevsky escaped not only the traps of Greek Dionysism but also the mysticism of monophysite Christianity in which human nature vanished.

Man has a part in eternity and Dostoevsky descends to the depths of the divine life together with man. All his work is a plea for man. He was in radical opposition to the monophysite spirit: He recognised not one single nature, human or divine, but two natures, human and divine. He took such a strong line on this point that, compared with his, the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic conception seems almost to smack of monophysitism, to suggest and inclination to absorb the human in the divine nature (pp. 65-66).

The Renaissance liberated human powers and created a new culture, which marked the beginning of a new era and modern history. However, while emphasizing the integrity of the human nature, the Renaissance started slowly rejecting the union with the divine nature: "The Renaissance set free the creative powers of man and expressed the creative upsurge of man. In this was its truth. Still, however, it disconnected man from the spiritual wellsprings of life, it denied the spiritual man, who alone can be a creator, and it asserted exclusively the natural man – the slave of necessity".¹¹

11 БЕРДЯЕВ, "Конец Ренессанса", с. 30.

Cutting himself from the spiritual centre of life – from God – man disconnected himself from his own spiritual depths. Having lost the centre of life, he also lost his own spiritual center, ceasing to be a spiritual being. By the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, at the summit of the humanistic era, European man appears empty and exhausted, oblivious as to where the epicenter of his life was. He lost the connection with the abyss of being beneath him.

What needs to be stressed is that the man of the Renaissance lost his spiritual centre because he was unable to replace the medieval monophysite image of God with an acceptable alternative. Thus, he went to another extreme and tried to create a new world without any help from above.¹² My question is, was the Renaissance man capable of philosophically defining freedom that would satisfy his new sense of dignity? We could address the same question to Dostoevsky. What are the essential traits of Dostoevsky's concept of freedom?

I argue that both the Renaissance and Dostoevsky failed to grasp that the genuine freedom is the question of ontology. To be free means to be unique and irreplaceable. It follows that if *to be* means *to act*, and if *to act* means *to create*, I am inimitable and free only in so far as I am able to expand being by creating a reality that has never existed before. Nietzsche was one the rare philosophers who was aware of the ontological nature of freedom. When his Zarathustra proclaims that, "if there are gods, then there is nothing left for us to create",¹³ he speaks about ontological freedom.

Humanism did not instantly begin to elevate man without God and against God – at least this was not the case with Pico della Mirandola and a number of philosophers of the Renaissance era. However, there was already the seed of corruption within humanism and apostasy from God, and it is from here that humanism of modern history sprouted.¹⁴

There hopes were on a revealing of man, ultimately oriented towards this world and turning away from the other world. And they lost depth. Man, as revealed by them, the man of modern history, had no depth and was compelled to wander life on the surface. On the surface, free from the connections with the deep, he would test out his creative powers. He does much, but comes to exhaustion and loss of faith in himself.¹⁵

12 *Ibid.*, c. 25.

13 Nietzsche's exact phrase is as follows: "Away from God and gods this will lured me; what would there be to create, after all, if there were gods?" Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 67.

14 БЕРДЯЕВ, "Конец Ренессанса", с. 33.

15 *Ibid.*, c. 29.

It is not by chance that man in the 16th century instigated despicable transgressions, adds Berdyaev. Humanism released man's energy but left him spiritually empty. At the very essence of modern history there is a gap between man and the abyss of being, which one is tempted to compare to Heidegger's *Seinvergessenheit* or the "oblivion of being".¹⁶ The Renaissance created unparalleled cultural values but did not completely succeed in affirming purely human creativity. "The Renaissance did not succeed, the Reformation did not succeed, and the Enlightenment did not succeed",¹⁷ concludes Berdyaev.

One of the modern history's most important problems is "the twofold splitting of the Renaissance", i.e., the affirmation of man without God and against God and, secondly, the denial of the image and likeness of God in man that leads to the final destruction of man.¹⁸

While the Renaissance exalted man, it has also blocked the access to the image of God he carried in himself, enslaving him to natural necessity. Natural man, however, is not connected to the infinite source of creative powers. But the play of human powers left on their own could not continue infinitely. This became obvious during the 19th century when the basic contradiction of humanism revealed itself across all the domains of modern history. The works of Ludwig Feuerbach and Auguste Comte, who were the preachers of the religion of mankind, contain very little in common with the Renaissance Humanism and one can sense the approach of the inner catastrophe. The rebellious spirit of the Reformation gave birth to Enlightenment and Revolution, to positivism, socialism, and anarchism.¹⁹

It is impossible to resolve the problem of the Renaissance simply by reconnecting man with his spiritual center. This could give results only if a different picture of God is introduced. What we are searching for is a God who *needs* the human person, a God who is enlarged and enriched by the human person. Divine freedom is about God's capacity to create his ontological other, who can enrich him with his otherness. Human freedom lies in the capacity to amplify God's being. This is what the ontological freedom involves. Berdyaev knew this and this is why he reactivated the notion of the *Ungrund* or *Uncreated freedom*.

The fact that Dostoevsky speaks about the eternal human contradiction au-

16 See for example, Martin HEIDEGGER, "Überwindung der Metaphysik", in Martin HEIDEGGER, *Wegmarken (Gesamtausgabe, Abt. I, Bd. 9)* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2004), pp. 79-80.

17 БЕРДЯЕВ, "Конец Ренессанса", с. 15.

18 *Ibid.*, с. 34.

19 *Ibid.*, с. 35.

tomatically locates him in a larger philosophical context. This context is the early Greek philosophy.

Parmenides and Heraclitus

Berdyaev discerned two major trends in the history of philosophy. The first one stems from Parmenides and the school of Elis. This school belongs to the classical Greek thought, Platonic and Aristotelian alike, and the doctrine of “closed” natures. As Eric Lionel Mascall argued: “[For all Greeks] everything had a nicely rounded off nature which contained implicitly everything that the being could ever become... What Greek thought could not have tolerated... would have been the idea that a being could become more perfect in its kind by acquiring some characteristic which was not implicit in its nature before”.²⁰

It would be *contradictio in adjecto* [contradiction in terms] to say that God, being absolutely perfect, could become “more perfect”. God’s perfection entails two other fundamental characteristics of His being. God is immovable and immutable. God’s hypothetical acquiring of a new feature would be regarded as motion and change, which, as we know, is against Aristotelian rule according to which every motion and change are signs of imperfection.

Berdyaev rejected the aforementioned classical ontology, a “long-standing and venerable tradition, which goes back to Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas, and continues in many other trends of modern philosophy”.²¹ He is closer to the second trend, that of Heraclitus and Jacob Böhme, who understand life as a fire and the battle of the opposing elements, struggle between light and darkness. Berdyaev believes that Böhme penetrated more deeply into the problem of the origin of evil than the people of the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas or Dante, for example. According to the German mystic, if we argue that God is the Absolute, we must deny the existence of evil, because evil cannot exist alongside an omnipotent Absolute. For him, however, God is not only love but also wrath. Due to his vision of the world as a fiery, dynamic process, Böhme already stands on the threshold of modern times.²² It is this philosophical current that Dostoevsky belongs to, believes Berdyaev.

20 Eric Lionel MASCALL, *The Openness of Being: Natural Theology Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), p. 246.

21 Nicolas BERDYAEV, *Dream and Reality*, (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), p. 99.

22 Николай А. БЕРДЯЕВ, “Из этюдов о Я. Беме. Этюд I. Учение об Ungrund’е и свободе”, *Путь*, февр. 1930, № 20, с. 52-53.

Böhme introduced the notion of the *Ungrund* to the Western philosophy and Hegel saw him as the father of the German idealism. The *Ungrund* is a bottomless potency of being above good and evil. It seems that Böhme has never asked the question whether the *Ungrund* is created by God. The answer should be obvious if we know that the *Ungrund* is an eternal yearning for becoming and the cradle of the birth of God. Nonetheless, in Böhme's phrasing the *Ungrund* is *in* God. This detail is so self-evident that most of philosophers would not even notice it. How could it be otherwise? The *Ungrund* must be *in* God because *everything* is in God. If we adhere to the Aristotelian image of the Absolute as a "nicely rounded off nature which contained implicitly everything that the being could ever become", the fact that something is *in* God is not the least surprising. If something is *in* God, it must be created by God, because *everything* is God's creation.

Unlike Böhme, Berdyaev believed that the *Ungrund* was not created by God. To clarify his point, he coins the term *Uncreated freedom*. If freedom were uncreated, it would not be accurate to say that it is *in* God. When we use preposition "in" for location, this normally suggests that, by being *in*, something is also a *part* of the larger entity. This is at least how Berdyaev understood Böhme's application of the preposition. Thus, he makes an unprecedented claim arguing that the *Ungrund* is *outside* of God. How can there be something *outside* of God or, in other words, how can there be something *not created* by God? According to classical theism, of course, there is nothing uncreated nor outside of God.

Therefore, by accepting *Uncreated freedom* we are bound to abandon classical theism and the concept of the Absolute as *actus purus*. God's structure is no longer viewed as monolith and potentless. God is not a fully actualised being without vestiges of non-being. Unlike the monolith Absolute, God is now described as a *binary* structure, a unity of being and non-being. This is the antinomy that Dostoevsky allegedly discovered in God's nature.

Berdyaev credits Hegel for whom "truth is in the transition from being to nothingness, and from nothingness to being".²³ Hegel argued that the concept of *identity* should be replaced by the notion of *contradiction*.

Identity, says Hegel, is a definition of only simple, immediate, dead being, whereas contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality. It is only in so far

23 Compare this with Paul Tillich's contention: "The nature of life is actualisation, not actuality". Paul TILICH, *Systematic Theology* (Digswell Place: James Nisbet & Co. Ltd, 1968), p. 272. Philosophers who hate the idea of Becoming are, in Nietzsche's words, "monotono-theists". Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. by Antony M. Ludovici (London: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2007), p. 17.

as nothingness has within itself its contradiction that it has movement and attains a state of wakefulness and activity. Dialectic is a real life.²⁴

Paul Tillich avers that, insofar as God is a living God, two elements in him [*posse* and *esse*, or in Hegel's vocabulary thesis and antithesis] *must remain in tension*.²⁵ This is a theological schema in which God and the "nihil" become opposites, and it is more radical than the one in which God domesticates the "nihil". The "nihil", in a sense, becomes God's rival.²⁶

Contradiction, which is supposed to replace identity, cannot be a Platonic non-being, nor the absolute non-being of the Christian theology. Platonic non-being (*me on*) is finished and cannot serve as a source of newness; neither Christian non-being (*ouk on*) can serve the purpose because it is an absolute non-being – only a logical category, which means that God is left without its antithesis, that God is a monolith Absolute.

Berdyaev has never suggested explicitly that Dostoevsky's concept of freedom was insufficient. His wording is more careful and he never goes beyond his statement about Dostoevsky and the *Ungrund*. However, he cannot help making a somewhat contrasting statement. On the one hand, he argues that Dostoevsky did not develop sufficiently his picture of God; on the other hand, this did not prevent him from saying that Dostoevsky was not a monophysite (p. 66). Berdyaev himself believed that both in the teachings of the Eastern Church Fathers and the contemporary Orthodox theology there was a fatal inclination towards monophysitism. Apparently, Berdyaev wants to say that Dostoevsky's picture of man was not monophysite but that he needed to make a few more strokes to make this picture impeccable. He never elaborates what exactly he had in mind, which leaves room for different theories.

Dostoevsky and freedom

Berdyaev speaks about two kinds of freedom. There is a freedom of the second Adam, – a rational freedom – as well as the first and final freedom of the second Adam. Freedom of the second Adam is the freedom of goodness whereas freedom of the first Adam is the freedom of evil (p. 73). For Berdyaev, oblig-

24 Nikolai BERDYAEV, *Beginning and the End*, trans. by R. M. French (San Rafael, CA: Seimantion Press, 2009), p. 94.

25 TILlich, pp. 272-273 (emphasis mine – R. K.).

26 Gavin HYMAN, "Augustine on the Nihil: An Interrogation", *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 9, no. 1, 2008, pp. 35-49: 41, 48-49.

atory goodness ceases to be goodness because it is not free. But free goodness, which is alone true goodness, entails the liberty of evil. That is the tragedy of freedom that Dostoevsky studied and discovered to its bottom (p. 70). Free goodness entails the freedom of evil, but freedom of evil leads to the destruction of freedom and to *evil necessity*. On the other hand, denial of the freedom of evil in favour of an exclusive freedom of good terminates equally in a negation of freedom and its degeneration into a *good necessity*.

We have seen that the classical image of God as *actus purus* does not allow for the existence of evil. God is the Absolute, fully actualised, potentless, and monolith, He does not leave room for evil. Thus, the existence of evil ought to be denied. Evil, according to Augustine, is simply a *privatio boni*, a privation or absence of goodness. Unwilling to reinterpret mainstream concept of God, Luther and Calvin ended up by rejecting human freedom and embracing predestinarianism (p. 70). Eastern Orthodoxy, although well-disposed towards freedom, has never managed to recognize sufficiently that liberty is a mystery that still needs to be discovered. We need to understand that Christ is not only Truth, but *truth about freedom*, stresses Berdyaev (p. 71).

In his other works, Berdyaev makes an important distinction between *freedom from* and *freedom for*. The Church Fathers concern themselves almost exclusively with the negative aspect of freedom or freedom, and liberation, *from* passions. They neglect positive aspect of anthropology, i.e., freedom *for*, because it involves a contribution of the human nature to the divine.²⁷ If God, however, is defined as the perfect Absolute, there is nothing new that human nature is able to offer. So, by creating human person God has not added anything new to His being, neither will He lose anything should the human being disappear. It follows that the only “positive” action human nature can perform is to withdraw and leave space for the divine nature.

The teachers of the Church had a doctrine of the theosis of man, but in this theosis there is no man at all. The very problem of man is not even put. But man is godlike not only because he is capable of *suppressing his own nature and thus freeing a place for divinity*. There is godlikeness in human nature itself, in the very human voice of that nature. Silencing the world and the passions liberates

27 Nicolas BERDYAEV, *The Meaning of the Creative Act* (San Rafael, CA: Semantron press, 2009), p. 84. Paul A. SCARINGI, *Freedom and the “Creative Act” in the writings of Nikolai Berdyaev: An Evaluation in Light of Jürgen Moltmann’s Theology of Freedom*, PhD thesis (University of St Andrews, Scotland, September, 2007), <http://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/bitstream/10023/443/1/THESIS.pdf> (14.01.2026).

man. God desires that not only God should exist, but man as well.²⁸

According to John Zizioulas, the noted Greek theologian, in searching for personal freedom man faces two options: either to deny his free will and comply with the will of God or to destroy the God-given, created world.²⁹ Apparently, freedom *for* is but an illusion unless humans possess capacity to create a new ontological reality. Human being is created in God's image, and this image is what the Church Fathers define as *autoexousion* or the power of absolute self-determination. Nonetheless, God defined as the Absolute is the *prima causa*, cause of everything that exists. This means that in the chain of causation he determines everything. Therefore, an irreconcilable clash between the doctrine of God's omnipotence and the teaching on *imago Dei* remains unresolved.

To be free means to possess "absolute ontological otherness", to be a unique personality, suggests Zizioulas.³⁰ A unique personal manifestation appears as a total newness, something previously nonexistent. But if we depict God as perfect and complete, we also need to accept that His world is finished and closed. By predicating God's perfection, we agree that nothing new can be added to this world. Freedom as absolute ontological otherness is therefore inconceivable. This is why man can only choose between two possibilities: he can renounce his freedom and identify with God's will ("personhood leads to God"), or he can rebel against the given reality by trying to destroy it ("or to non-existence", in Zizioulas' words).

Kirillov

For three years I've been seeking the attribute of my divinity and I've found it; the attribute of my divinity is *self-will!* That's all I can do to prove in the highest point my independence and my new terrible freedom. For it is very terrible. I am killing myself to prove my independence and my new terrible freedom.³¹

28 BERDYAEV, *The Meaning*, p. 84.

29 "Human freedom can prove itself ultimately only through the annihilation of what exists. [...] Personhood, understood in its terrifying ontological ultimacy [...] leads to God – or to non-existence" – John ZIZIOULAS, *Communion & Otherness* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), p. 235.

30 "If there is no absolute, ontological otherness between God and the world, there is no ontological freedom allowing each of these two 'beings' to be *themselves* and thus to be at all" – ZIZIOULAS, p. 19.

31 Fyodor DOSTOEVSKY, *Demons*, transl. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York, London: Vintage Classics, 1994), part III, chapter 3, section 6, p. 617 (emphasis mine – R. K.).

The divine attribute – or the divine icon – in us is our self-will or power of choice, declares Kirillov confirming that for him freedom is not the question of ontology.³² Ontological freedom, we remember, implies the human person's absolute ontological otherness or uniqueness. Therefore, all the manifestations of this uniqueness are also necessarily unique, i.e., radically new or previously non-existent. The manifestation of uniqueness represents amplification of being. After each manifestation there is *more* being than there was before. On the other hand, by exhibiting our freedom of will we do not create. Being remains the same as it was before; nothing new comes into existence and we only choose between already existing options. Freedom of will is the only kind of liberty that the Absolute or the *actus purus* allows. Since freedom of will does not permit a change and augmentation of being, it does not support positive kind of freedom or freedom *for*. It knows only negative freedom or freedom *from*.

Kirillov is incapable of demonstrating his freedom as freedom *for*. Freedom *for* seems to be absent from Dostoevsky's novels. Had he followed the implications of his idea of God, he would have to acknowledge a Böhmeian antinomic and binary notion of Divinity. It is only the binary ontology of Uncreated freedom that allows for the creation of an absolute originality in being, justifying the concept of freedom *for*.

Just like John Zizioulas, Dostoevsky offers a genuine concept of freedom but only on the doctrinal level. When he is supposed to provide its theological grounding, he cannot follow the consequences that require deconstruction of the traditional teaching on God. On this point his theory of freedom is close to that of Zizioulas. Both theories eventually prove to be tragic. Neither of the authors goes that far as to claim that freedom is uncreated. However, freedom must be uncreated because what is created is by definition determined. On the other hand, if freedom is uncreated, everything created is non-determined. If the created is non-determined, it follows that what we call "created" is uncreated. Thus far, Zizioulas complies with the argumentation and even declares that "the person as absolute ontological otherness must be uncreated".³³ From here there are only two possible roads. He can either declare that the genuine person is uncreated, accepting that this is possible only if freedom is uncreated,

32 "The moral sense of freedom [...] is satisfied with the simple power of choice: man is free who is able to choose one of the possibilities set before him. But this 'freedom' is already bound by the 'necessities' and the ultimate and most binding of these 'necessities' for man is his existence itself: how can man be absolutely free when he cannot do other than accept his existence?" – John ZIZIOULAS, *Being as Communion* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1985), p. 42.

33 ZIZIOULAS, *Being*, p. 143.

i.e., only if in God's binary structure there is a room for the Ungrund; or he can choose not to question the Patristic notion of God, in which case we face two equally tragic options. We can give up our free will and identify ourselves with God's will; or we can choose to destroy the existing world. Kirillov selects the second option.

Conclusion

When Kirillov suggests that suicide is the ultimate proof of the terrible freedom and human divinity, he complies with the traditional monolith image of God as *actus purus*. From there, he can imagine freedom only as freedom *from*, i.e., as a negative freedom that expresses itself in the ultimate form of destruction – destruction of his own personality.

Had Dostoevsky embraced the theory of uncreated freedom, at least one of the characters of his novels would have been the embodiment of the idea of freedom *for*. As far as I can see, this was not the case. We need to conclude therefore that Dostoevsky's theory of God was not fundamentally different from the one favoured by John Zizioulas and his Patristic predecessors, which, according to Berdyaev, betrayed "a fatal inclination towards monophysitism".³⁴

³⁴ BERDYAEV, *The Meaning*, p. 111.

